

Reagan's election cheering for science?

Harder line promises more spin-off funds

Washington

A big step for US politics, but a relatively small step for US science seems to be the main verdict on last week's presidential and congressional elections, with scientists unlikely to suffer as much from a swing to the right as other recipients of government spending.

President-elect Ronald Reagan has already said that he wants a 2 per cent across-the-board cut in the budgets of all federal agencies next year. But he is on record as supporting increased funds for research and development, a larger defence budget (with its spill-over into basic research) and the retention of both the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the post of President's Science Advisor.

The Republican takeover in the Senate has been as significant as Reagan's victory. The defeat of a significant handful of liberal Democrats will mean a major shift in the content of legislation. Again, however, the science budget may escape serious cuts, partly because key committee positions are likely to be filled by liberal Republicans, such as Senator Charles Mathias of Maryland, who have long been supporters of increased research funding.

Although little was said about science during the presidential election campaign, Mr Reagan has made it known in the past few weeks that he favours increased spending on science, particularly in areas related to defence needs. His main publicly-stated reservations were about the organization of OSTP, whose new staff would, he said, gather information in an informal way "rather than relying on 'blue ribbon panels' which are often partisan and work in secret".

The key question is who will fill the major science and technology positions in the new Reagan administration. Many of these choices are unlikely to be made until the new year. But preliminary discussions were held last weekend by a task force whose members indicate the likely directions of a Reagan science policy.

The task force was brought together by Dr Simon Ramo, co-founder of the advanced engineering firm TRW Inc., an adviser to Mr Reagan during the election campaign and former chairman of a congressionally-established federal science and technology committee under President Ford.

Co-chairman of the task force is Dr Arthur Bueche, vice-president of research and development for the General Electric

Company, a strong supporter of nuclear power and a possible Science Advisor.

Other members of the task force include Dr Harold Agnew, past director of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory; Dr Ed David, president of Exxon Research and, for a time, President Nixon's Science Advisor; Dr Frederick Seitz; Dr Guy Stever, ex-director of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and President Ford's Science Advisor; Dr Bill Baker, past president of Bell Laboratories; and Dr Edward Teller, a close adviser to Mr Reagan when he was governor of California.

Also included are several senior administrators from the defence and aerospace industries, including Dr Albert D. Whelan, vice-president of the Hughes

Aircraft Corporation and a strong supporter of the commercialization through private industry of communications and Earth monitoring satellites.

One immediate task for the committee is to select a new administrator for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to succeed Dr Robert Frosch, who has already announced his intention to take up the position of president of the new National Association of Engineering Societies in January.

Less certain is whether an immediate successor will be sought for Donald Dr Fredrickson, director of the National Institutes of Health. Dr Fredrickson was

Plusses and minuses, election 1980

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Fast breeder research. One of Mr Reagan's first actions as President is likely to be to lift the embargo on the construction of the Liquid Metal Fast Breeder Reactor at Clinch River in Tennessee. Most of the major components have been built, but the test reactor's completion was held up by President Carter because of proliferation dangers and also a belief that fast breeder reactors are unlikely to be needed in the United States until well into the next century. Utility companies, however, which have provided a substantial amount of the funds, are keen to see the project completed, and are now likely to get their way.

Chemical weapons. President-elect Mr Reagan is also likely to give the go-ahead to a new facility for producing binary chemical weapons, favoured in Congress but, following President Nixon's earlier ban on their production, requiring a presidential declaration that such weapons are needed. In a campaign statement, Mr Reagan said that since binary weapons are much safer to stockpile and transport than existing stockpiles of poison gas, "we should proceed with preparation to convert to binary weapons".

Science court. In another statement, Reagan also said that he would explore the feasibility of a "science court" to help arrange public discussions of controversial scientific issues, a proposal that generated considerable publicity four years ago, but has since lapsed into relative obscurity.

House of Representatives. The House has lost one of its three scientist members, Mr Mike McCormack (see below), but has gained another, Mr Jim Coyne, an energy analyst and president of the Coyne Chemical Corporation. With Mr Coyne's election, all three scientists in the House are now Republican.

Minus

Mr Mike McCormack, previously chairman of the House Science and Technology Committee's powerful energy research subcommittee, a strong advocate of nuclear power and a leading architect of recent nuclear fusion research legislation. Mr McCormack lost a tight race in Washington, where his district included the Department of Energy's Hanford Reservation.

Mr Jerome A. Ambro. A Democrat from Long Island, Mr Ambro was chairman of the Science and Technology Committee's subcommittee on natural resources and environment. He played a significant role in generating congressional approval for the 400-GeV particle accelerator, ISABELLE, at the Brookhaven National Laboratory.

Environmental regulation. The loss of liberals such as Senators Frank Church (Idaho), John Culver (Iowa) and Gaylord Nelson (Wisconsin) and Representatives Bob Eckardt (Texas) and Andrew Maguire (New Jersey) will be a major blow to supporters of tough environmental regulation. Their only consolation is the re-election of another liberal, Congressman Morris Udall, chairman of the House Interior Committee. Mr Reagan has promised to repeal environmental and health legislation that is considered unnecessarily burdensome to industry.

Alfred Carnesale. The change in administration makes it unlikely that, as proposed by Mr Carter, Dr Alfred Carnesale, professor of public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Management, will now become chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Although respected as a negotiator, Dr Carnesale is closely identified with a Ford-Mitre study that strongly influenced President Carter's stand against fast breeders.

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